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Sasquatch: The Testimony of Tradition

The author discusses Coast Salish and other Northwest Coast Indian beliefs in manlike beings as they find their expression in native languages. He demonstrates that Native Indian terms for and beliefs about giant hominids do not make a good case either for or against the reality, as Western science sees reality, of these beings: the question "Are they real or mythical, natural or supernatural to the Indians?" is irrelevant to the scientific question. On the other hand, the question "Are they real as defined by Western science?" is not irrelevant to the *anthropological* study of the "mythical" and "supernatural."

Are Native Indian traditions good evidence for the existence of the Sasquatch? Non-Indian believers in the beast have evidently thought so ever since the word "Sasquatch" itself was adopted from an Indian word, evidently supposing that the Indians would not have such traditions if there were not a real animal there. But a contrary argument can also be made—that the Indian traditions in this region resemble what we know to be mere folklore elsewhere, and therefore the Sasquatch is simply a myth. This paper is concerned with this question. I shall outline the history of the growth of interest in the Sasquatch, summarize what is known of Indian traditions, and comment on their relevance as evidence.[1]

The word "Sasquatch" is an anglicization of a Coast Salish Indian word sésq̓əc (from the Stalo dialect of the Halkomelem language). It was introduced to non-Indians across Canada and in the United States during the 1920's as the name of a huge, hairy, human-looking creature said to live in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia, where Indians occasionally encountered it. The word was used in a series of newspaper and magazine articles by John W. Burns, who had long been a school teacher at the Chehalis Indian Reserve on the Harrison River west of the resort village of Harrison Hot Springs.[2] The Harrison River flows out of Harrison Lake, which lies between high, wild, mountain ranges capable of concealing mysteries, and into the Fraser River just below the town of Agassiz, about sixty miles east of Vancouver. The Sasquatch image was adopted by Harrison Hot Springs as an advertising device and for a while there were local celebrations called "Sasquatch Days."

Local interest then seems to have died down until 1957, when the village

decided to stage a "Sasquatch hunt" as its centennial project for the British Columbia centennial of 1958. At this point John Green, then editor of the Agassiz weekly newspaper, entered the picture. Green says that he had regarded the whole business as a joke until the new publicity and search for newsworthy material uncovered earlier reports of encounters with Sasquatches and so encouraged people who had before been reluctant to discuss their experiences to come out with them.[3] Green then began seriously to collect reports of sightings and meetings, old and new, and to investigate phenomena thought to be material evidence, such as footprints.

Meanwhile, reports of "Bigfoot" in northwestern California, "Abominable Snowmen" or "Yeti" in Asia, and other such mysterious creatures were in the news. It was inevitable that comparisons would be made and inferences drawn about their identity. Perhaps the most ambitious comparison and interpretation appeared in 1961, when Ivan Sanderson, a naturalist and popular writer on animals, published *Abominable Snowman: Legend Come to Life, The Story of Sub-Humans on Five Continents from the Early Ice Age until Today*.[4] Sanderson argued that several non-human hominids survive in mountain forests in both the Old World and the New World. Prominent among them was the Sasquatch.

John Green has published four reports on his growing files.[5] His 1973 report shows that sightings and tracks have been reported from all over North America but most frequently from British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and northwestern California, and with increasing frequency in the last few years. Other books on these phenomena in this region have been published by Roger Patterson, Don Hunter and Rene Dahinden, and Peter Byrne.[6] Also, several people have worked to establish organizations to collect data and investigate reports; these include the late Roger Patterson at Yakima, Washington, succeeded by Ron Olson at Eugene, Oregon, Peter Byrne at The Dalles, Oregon, and Jon Beckjord at Marietta, Washington, and more recently Seattle. All of these people, and many more, have been engaged in a quest for a creature they believe does indeed exist. And all that I have named are, I believe, "laymen" in the sense that they are not degree-holding, academically based zoologists, anthropologists, or scholars in some other relevant discipline.

Most professional people in the relevant disciplines have, publicly, remained pretty quiet about the whole thing. However, one important negative response came shortly after the publication of Sanderson's book. In 1964, Bacil F. Kirtley, a folklorist, published an article entitled "Unknown Hominids and New World Legends."[7] Kirtley showed that beliefs about legendary hominids in Latin America are listed in Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*[8] for other parts of the world and that these beings are believed to exist even on oceanic islands beyond the range of prehistoric hominids

and hardly the mountain refuges of Sanderson's theory. Kirtley concluded that the unknown hominids are simply myths. The argument runs, I think, that if the people of the Solomon Islands can imagine apemen in the forest then so can the people of Tibet or British Columbia, and therefore that is what has happened. The witnesses are not lying, but simply allowing their memories to translate baffling or disturbing experiences into a language provided by their heritage of folklore. I suspect that most folklorists and cultural anthropologists might agree with Kirtley.

But while folklore may explain why people see Sasquatches and other non-human hominids, it does not explain the footprints. And these have made a few professionals respond positively. An archeologist, Don Abbott, a physical anthropologist, Grover Krantz, and a primatologist, John Napier, have asserted that this physical evidence cannot be explained away.[10] Krantz has been especially resolute in this stance. The foot- and hand-prints are too numerous, in too many remote and inaccessible places, and too true to what the prints of a giant hominid ought to look like to be a hoax. Creating them as a hoax, says Krantz, is beyond the technical skill, anatomical knowledge, and capacity for co-operation and secrecy of any imaginable hoaxers. It is easier to believe that they are real.[11]

Partly, I believe, as a result of Krantz's work, another anthropologist, Roderick Sprague, who edits *NARN* (*Northwest Anthropological Research Notes*), decided to respond to a charge made by John Green. Green had asserted that we cultural anthropologists have been ignoring—and so in effect concealing—data on the Sasquatch because we have failed to recognize that our Indian informants have been talking about real rather than mythical animals.[12] In an editorial, Sprague invited papers presenting and/or analyzing ethnographic, folkloristic, and linguistic data relevant to the Sasquatch and presenting models for the study of Sasquatch phenomena.[13] There have been a number of responses, including Krantz's papers already cited and two on native terms and traditions, by Bruce Rigsby and by me.[14]

Rigsby presented linguistic data from the southern Plateau (Sahaptin and Molala terms) and from the northern Northwest Coast (Kwakiutlan, Bella Coola, and Tsimshian terms) indicating the borrowing of terms or coining of loan translations across language family boundaries. My paper presented both linguistic and cultural data for the Coast Salish peoples of southwestern British Columbia and western Washington. The native terms from both sources, with a few additions, are presented in the accompanying table.

My paper was in part a response to Green's view of the reality of the Sasquatch to the Indians. A review of the evidence for Coast Salish beliefs in human-looking beings living in the forests and mountains around them showed that most Coast Salish peoples acknowledge the existence of several

such creatures, ranging in size from dwarves to giants and varying considerable in resemblance to humanity. Of all of these creatures, only the Basket Ogress appears in narratives that the Coast Salish themselves might classify as myths. The evidence for belief in the others—the tree fellers, earth-dwelling dwarves, wild men, and Sasquatch-like mountain giants—consists mainly of brief statements describing the creatures and narratives telling of encounters with them. These statements and narratives do not seem different in kind from statements and narratives about other creatures the Coast Salish know about, including those well known to Western zoologists, like beavers and grizzlies, and others unknown to them, like giant two-headed serpents and thunderbirds. Thus, the being whose native name was anglicized "Sasquatch" exists less in native mythology than in native zoology, though in a zoology that includes creatures we Europeans would call "mythical" or "supernatural." Moreover, the appearance of the Basket Ogress in myths need not imply that she or her kind are unreal, any more than the appearance of Mink or Raven in myths implies that minks and ravens do not exist in the real world. So if we have, as Green suspected, put the Sasquatch into a native category of "supernatural," we have indeed been wrong. For the Coast Salish the Sasquatch is part of the natural world. But if on that basis we must seriously consider the possibility that the Sasquatch is part of our natural world, then to be consistent we must consider the same possibility for the tree-striker, the giant two-headed serpent, and the thunderbird. Of course, only Indians have reported encounters with tree-strikers, two-headed serpents, and thunderbirds, while both Indians and non-Indians have reported encounters with Sasquatches. But using that as an argument for the reality of the Sasquatch would be begging the question. We cannot suppose from the outset that non-Indians are any less inclined to rely on folklore in interpreting experiences than are Indians.

This review of the Coast Salish data also showed that native descriptions of those creatures that sound like giant hominids (disregarding now the tree-strikers, dwarves, and such) are not very consistent. Nocturnal habits are mentioned most often but not always. Hair covering the body is not consistently mentioned, and some descriptions seem to imply a more human covering. About half the descriptions mention the habit of stealing food, less than half the stealing of women and children. In some accounts they speak but in others they only whistle. They may travel through water or avoid water. In one area they have unbending legs that allow them to run downhill only. In another they have spikes on their toes for kicking people. Some of them seem to have the rudiments of culture, others do not. Because of this inconsistency I concluded that the Coast Salish cultural evidence does not add up to a good case for the existence of a real animal.[15]

To the north, the Kwakiutl tell of two kinds of creatures that have recently

been identified with the Sasquatch. These are the bəḵʷə́s (*woodman*) and the dzónoq̓ʷa. But the woodman, as described by Boas, seems to be a rather different sort of creature.[16] He is nocturnal, like most Coast Salish Sasquatch-like beings, but he travels by canoe, is as cold as ice, and takes away drowned people. Boas likens him to the land-otter beings of the northern Northwest Coast peoples. The Kwakiutl dzónoq̓ʷa might make a somewhat better condidate for giant hominid status. This creature is described as a race of beings who live inland or on mountains, are twice the size of a man, with hairy hands, wide but deep-set eyes, black bodies, and peculiarities of speech.[17] The female has large, hanging breasts; she comes to villages and steals fish and children; she is the Basket Ogress of the Kwakiutl versions of stories told as far south as the Columbia River.

I do not have enough information on the *man of the woods* (or "ape") of the more northerly coast peoples nor on the Sasquatch-like creatures of the Plateau to make any further comparisons.

The native terms are also variable. Within the area of contiguous Coast Salish languages (Squamish to Upper Chehalis in the table, but with several languages unrepresented), we find two terms (marked *a* and *b*) of restricted distribution and three (*c*, *d*, and *e*) of wider distribution. Of these five, term *d* is analyzable, I believe, as *from upriver* and probably referred simply to hunting parties from the Interior that were occasionally taken for non-human creatures. The other four terms are, at the present state of knowledge, not analyzable. Also, it is not now possible to say whether the various forms of term *e*, for example, are true cognates and a heritage from proto-Coast Salish or are simply recent loans from one language into the others.

Outside the Salish area, as Rigsby pointed out, there is clear evidence of the borrowing of terms. Sahaptin and Molala are only very remotely related, and so the fairly close resemblance of a Sahaptin and a Molala word must mean that one language borrowed it from the other.

To the north, we can even say which way the borrowing went. The Kwakiutl term bəḵʷə́s is clearly identifiable as Kwakiutl in origin, being composed of the root bəkʷ-, *man-*, and the suffix -ʾəs, *-woods*, *-ground* (which glottalizes the preceding consonant). The term may be equally at home in the other Northern Wakashan languages, Heiltsuk and Haisla. But the Bella Coola must have borrowed their term from Northern Wakashan. The Coast Tsimshian and Nass-Gitksan terms, on the other hand, are phrases made up of native materials, but they seem to be loan translations. This suggests that the Tsimishian adopted the Northern Wakashan image of the "man of the woods."

From this review of data from a part of northwestern North America, my tentative conclusions are: that while Sasquatch-like creatures may inhabit the real world of the Indians, this may not be relevant to the question of

whether they inhabit the real world of Western science; that the Sasquatch-like creatures of the Native peoples have a range of attributes somewhat wider and less consistent than what we might expect a real animal to have; and that some of the names, and presumably some beliefs about them, have spread from one people to another. All of this does not make for a very persuasive argument that the Sasquatch is real.

But it does not disprove the existence of the Sasquatch either. In the native belief systems real animals like beavers exist in the same world as giant two-headed serpents, and real animals like beavers are given fanciful attributes in these beliefs. In the languages of the region, as elsewhere, names for real animals and beliefs about them can diffuse from one people to another.

I remain skeptical about the existence of a Sasquatch, but I do not see the question as trivial. It is important not only for the significance a Sasquatch would have for the study of primate evolution but also for the importance it would have for the study of myths. Sooner or later I expect to hear someone say, "It does not really matter whether there is a Sasquatch, because just by studying the stories people have told about it we can learn so much about man's myth-making propensities." Though I might once have agreed, I must now respectfully disagree.

Any hypothesis that we human beings have an innate propensity to create mythical wild men or apemen might be plausible if there are *no* wild men or apemen in the real world. But if there *are,* then this hypothesis becomes unnecessary; beliefs in wild men everywhere might then be the result of direct observation plus that old anthropological explanation—diffusion. Thus, the argument that if South Sea islanders tell about non-human hominids where none could possibly be, therefore wherever people tell about non-human hominids there are really none, is a non-sequitur. We could as easily say that if people in British Columbia are found to believe in twenty-foot-long snakes and we know that there are really none there, therefore the belief in twenty-foot-long snakes is everywhere false—even in the Amazon Basin. Showing that some beliefs are unfounded does not prove that all beliefs are unfounded, only that people are capable of imagining things, and that we must therefore be critical of all reports from anywhere.

Finally, I would end with the usual plea that more facts are needed about Native traditions but also with the observation that the Native peoples today may be as much influenced by mass media images of the Sasquatch as the rest of us. This means that images of the Sasquatch are and will be changing. And that too is worth study.

TABLE: NORTHWEST COAST NATIVE TERMS FOR MANLIKE MONSTERS

Languages are listed in geographical order from north to south. Native terms

are given in a modern linguistic orthography. Glosses are in italics. Anglicizations and identifying terms are enclosed in quotation marks. Sources are in parentheses.

Sasquatch-Like Beings

Nass-Gitksan
- gʸédm gʸilílixʸ *man of the woods* (Rigsby)
- gʸédm laχ sgʸiníst *man of the jackpines* (Rigsby)

Coast Tsimshian
- gʸédm gʸilháwli *man of the woods* (Rigsby)

Haisla
- búk̓ʷus *man of the woods*, "ape" (Rigsby)

Heiltsuk
- bák̓ʷəs *man of the woods*, "ape" (Risgby)

Bella Coola
- pk̓ʷús (Rigsby)

Kwakiutl
- bək̓ʷás *man of the woods* (Boas)

Squamish
- *a* smáyʔil "wild men" (Kuipers, Hill-Tout)

Halkomelem

Stalo dialect
- *b* sésq̓əc "Sasquatch" (Duff, Suttles)

Cowichan dialect
- *c* t̓θáməq̓ʷəs (Suttles)

Straits

Saanich dialect
- *c* t̓θáməḵʷəs (Suttles)

Lummi dialect
- *c* c̓áməḵʷəs (Suttles)
- *d* stə́y̓tal *from upriver* [?] (Suttles)

Clallam dialect
- *e* c̓yátkʷ "seeahtik" (Suttles)

Lushootseed (Puget)
- *e* c̓yátkʷuʔ "seatco" (Hess)
- *d* stíʔtal (Hess)

Twana
- *e* c̓iátqo (Elmendorf)

Quinault
- *e* c̓əǰátko (Olson)

Upper Chehalis
e čiátkʷ "Stick Indian" (Kinkade)
d stíʔtaɬ "Stick Indian" (Kinkade)
Columbian (Interior Salish)
sc̓wanáy̓təxʷ "Stick Indians" (Kinkade)
Sahaptin
Taidnapam dialect /
sɬ̓iyahá (Rigsby)
kwi · kwiyái *whistler* (Rigsby)
Umatilla dialect
sɬ̓iyaháma (Rigsby)
Molala
štíya (Rigsby)
lipáni (Rigsby)

Ogress Terms

Kwakiutl
dzónoq̓ʷa (Boas)
Squamish
qálqaliɬ (Kuipers)
Halkomelem
Stalo dialect
qəlqəlí · l (Suttles)
Cowichan dialect
čəwχ̣éʔləc (Suttles)
Straits
Lummi dialect
čəwχ̣éʔ ləč (Suttles)
Clallam dialect
slapu (Gunther)
Lushootseed
Skagit dialect
ʔáχ̣ʷədus (Hess)
Snohomish dialect
sxʷəyúq̓ʷ (Hess)
Kathlamet
aq̓asχ̣ensχ̣ena (Hymes)
Kiksht (Wasco)
aɬ̓aɬ̓alia (Sapir)

Sources: Terms listed above are taken from the following: Franz Boas, *Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology*, Memoirs of the American Folklore Society, vol. 28 (1935); Wilson Duff, *The Upper Stalo Indians of the Fraser Valley, British Columbia*, Anthropology in British Columbia memoir 1 (1953); William W. Elmendorf, *The Structure of Twana Culture*, Research Studies Monograph supplement 2 (Pullman: Washington State University, 1960); Erna Gunther, "Klallam Folk Tales," *University of Washington Publications in Anthropology* 1 (1925): 113–69; Thom Hess, *Dictionary of Puget Salish* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976); Charles Hill-Tout, "Notes on the Sk·qo mic of British Columbia, a branch of the great Salish Stock of North America," *British Association for the Advancement of Science 70th Meeting* ([London], 1900), pp. 472–549; Dell Hymes, personal communication, 1974; M. Dale Kinkade, personal communication, 1972, 1974; Aert Kuipers, *The Squamish Language: Grammar, Texts, Dictionary*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Mouton, 1967, 1969); Ronald J. Olson, "The Quinault Indians," *University of Washington Publications in Anthropology* 6 (1936): 1; Rigsby, "Some Pacific Northwest Native Language Names for the Sasquatch"; Edward Sapir, *Wishram Texts*, American Ethnological Society Publications, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1909); Suttles, "On the Cultural Track of the Sasquatch."

Notes

1. A part of the material contained in this paper was included in "Some Questions about the Sasquatch," which I presented at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society at Portland, Oregon, 1 November 1974.
2. For example, J.W. Burns, "Introducing B.C.'s Hairy Giants," *Maclean's Magazine*, 1 April 1921. See also, Alex MacGillivray, "'Shouldn't Be Captured' . . . Nothing Monstrous about Sasquatch, Says Their Pal," Vancouver *Sun*, 25 May 1957, and John Green, *On the Track of the Sasquatch* (Harrison Hot Springs, B.C.: John Green, 1968), p. 1.
3. Green, *On the Track of the Sasquatch*, pp. 1–3.
4. (Philadelphia and New York: Chilton, 1961).
5. *On the Track of the Sasquatch*; *The Year of the Sasquatch* (Agassiz, B.C.: Cheam Publishing, 1970); *The Sasquatch File* (Agassiz, B.C.: Cheam Publishing, 1973); and *Sasquatch: The Apes among Us* (Saanichton, B.C.: Hancock House, 1978).
6. Respectively, *Do Abominable Snowmen of America Really Exist?* (Yakima, WA: Franklin

Press, 1966), *Sasquatch* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), and *The Search for Big Foot: Monster, Myth or Man?* (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis, 1975).

7. *Western Folklore* 28 (1964): 77–90.
8. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).
9. Kirtley, "Unknown Hominids," pp. 87–89.
10. Abbott, in James B. Shuman, "Does an 'Abominable Snowman' Lurk in the Rockies, *Reader's Digest*, January 1969, pp. 46–50; Krantz, "Sasquatch Handprints," *Northwest Anthropological Research Notes* (*NARN*) 5, no. 2 (1971): 145–51, "Anatomy of the Sasquatch Foot," *NARN* 6, no. 1 (1972): 91–104, and "Additional Notes on Sasquatch Foot Anatomy," *NARN* 6, no. 2 (1972): no. 2 (1972): 230–41; Napier, *Bigfoot* (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1972).
11. Krantz, "Anatomy of the Sasquatch Foot," p. 103.
12. Green, *On the Track of the Sasquatch*, pp. 67–68.
13. "Editorial," *NARN* 4, no. 2 (1970): 127–28.
14. Rigsby, "Some Pacific Northwest Native Language Names for the Sasquatch Phenomenon," *NARN* 5, no. 2 (1971): 153–56, and Suttles, "On the Cultural Track of the Sasquatch," *NARN* 6, no. 1 (1972): 65–90. A collection of these papers has been published as *The Scientist Looks at the Sasquatch*, vol. 1, Anthropological Monographs of the University of Idaho no. 3 (Moscow, ID: University Press of Idaho, 1977), and vol. 2, Monograph no. 4 (1979).
15. I have only recently discovered that George Gibbs anticipated me by more than a century in commenting on this variation in attributes in a description of beliefs in Sasquatch-like beings in Washington (see Ella E. Clark, "George Gibbs' Account of Indian Mythology in Oregon and Washington Territories," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (1955–56): 313–15.
16. Franz Boas, *Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology*, Memoirs of the American Folklore Society, vol. 28 (New York: American Folklore Society, 1935), p. 146.
17. Ibid., pp. 144–46, 178.